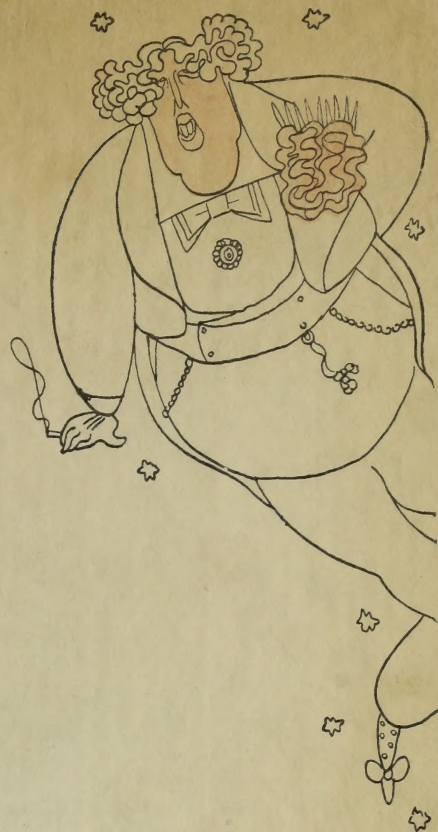
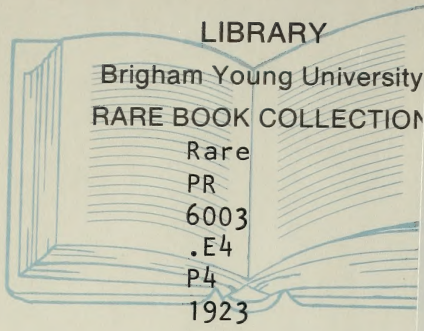


A PEEP  
INTO  
THE PAST

By  
MAX  
BEERBOHM







LIBRARY  
Brigham Young University  
RARE BOOK COLLECTION  
Rare  
PR  
6003  
.E4  
P4  
1923

3 1197 22968 7006



BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

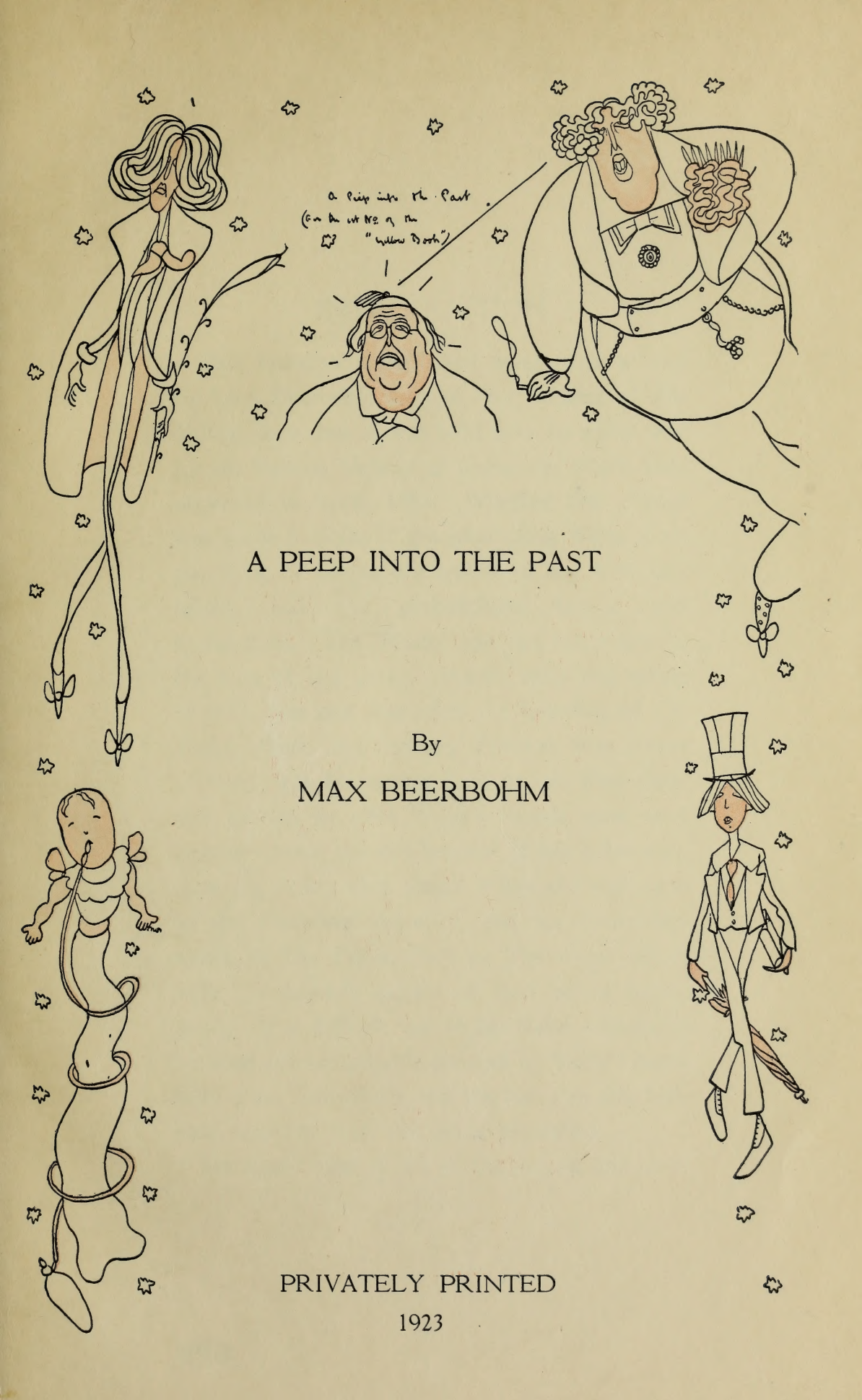






A PEEP INTO THE PAST

*This Edition is limited to 300 copies printed from type  
on Japan Vellum, and the type distributed.*



A Peep into the Past  
(on the life of the  
"Yellow Book")

## A PEEP INTO THE PAST

By

MAX BEERBOHM

PRIVATELY PRINTED

1923







## INTRODUCTION

This hitherto unpublished essay was written by Max Beerbohm for the first number of *The Yellow Book*, but it was held over to make way for his famous *Defence of Cosmetics*, which duly appeared in April, 1894. Whether this change was made because of the impending Wilde scandal it is, of course impossible to say with certainty, but the probabilities favour this explanation. The Wilde case did not come to the ears of the general public until the spring of 1895, just one year after the founding of *The Yellow Book*, but literary London was aware of what was happening long before that date, and already in 1894 Wilde's friends were very anxious about the recklessness of his behaviour. It is significant that Oscar Wilde, the archetype of the Decadent Nineties, did not contribute either to *The Yellow Book* or *The Savoy*, which were the literary organs of that whole movement. It is difficult not to see some connection between the remarkable absence of Wilde's name from these periodicals and the fact that this brilliant essay on him was never published.

The essay itself is one of the deftest and clev-



erest pieces of writing which Max Beerbohm has ever achieved. In it one can see how from the very beginning of his career Beerbohm was destined to be the satirist of the period with which he is associated, although he never displayed any of the qualities—or defects—of the Decadents. No cartoon of his is more devastating and illuminating than this solemn buffoonery of Wilde in terms of a domesticity as preposterous as Wilde's own pose of diabolism. At the same time Wilde had no more devoted admirer or faithful friend. It is characteristic of the good nature of Max's satire that it does not necessarily imply disapproval. It is just his fun.





A Peep into the Past  
(On the 1st No. of the  
"Yellow Book")

Oscar Wilde! I wonder how many of my readers this jingle of this name suggests anything at all? Yet, at one time, it was familiar to many and if we search back among the old volumes of *The Punch*, we shall find many a quip and crack cut at its owner's expense. But time is a quick mover and these many of us are fated to outlive our reputations and thus, though at one time *Mr. Wilde*, the old gentleman, of whom we are going to give our readers a brief account, was in his way quite a celebrity, to-day his star is set, his fame obscured in this busy, changeable city.

Once a welcome guest in many of our Bohemian haunts, he lives now a life of quiet retirement in his little house in *11th Street* with his wife and his two sons, his prop and mainstay, solacing himself with many a reminiscence of the friends of his youth. Whilst he leaves his better known brother, William, to perpetuate the social name of the family, always noted for his kinacious memory, it is one of the old gentleman's keenest pleasures to regale a visitor from the outer world with stories of the late, <sup>Mr.</sup> *Frank Miles*, or *Godwin* the architect, or *Robert Browning* or the Earl of *Lyttelton*, who was not the only member of the upper ten thousand to know an *Wilde* with his personal friendships. "All, all are gone, the old familiar faces" and with the quiet resignation of *de omni* who knows that he is the survivor of a bygone day, *Mr. Wilde* tries more & more to exist in its memory or to solace himself with the old classics of which ~~he~~ <sup>he</sup> was even so earnest a student, with his *Plato* and his *Shakespeare*, his *Joseph Miller* and the literal translations of the Greek dramatists. But that he is a mere *laudator temporis acti*, a bibliophile and nothing more, he still keeps up his writing, is still the question for work that he always was. He has not yet abandoned his old intuition of dramatizing *Salome* and the amount of journalistic matter that he quietly produces and contributes anonymously to various periodicals is surprising. Only last year an underground journal called *The Spirit Lamp* accepted a form of his ~~travels~~ <sup>travels</sup> in which they were evidences that he has lost little of his old talent for vivification.

*Mr. Wilde* is an early riser. Every morning, winter & summer, at 4.30 A.M. his portly form — (he is in appearance not unlike ~~that~~ <sup>that</sup> *Sir William Harcourt* and still stands six-foot three in his slippers) — may be seen brooding over the little spirit-kettle, at which he boils himself his cup of hot cocoa. Donning his work-a-day clothes, he proceeds at once to start his study and commences work, continuing steadily till breakfast, which he takes in company with his wife and sons. Highly most regular in his habits, he is something of a martinet about punctuality in ~~other~~ <sup>other</sup> his household and this accounts for the constant ~~success~~ <sup>success</sup> ~~searching~~ <sup>searching</sup> succession of page-bruys <sup>about the neighbourhood</sup>. Breakfast over, the master of the house enjoys his modest cigarette — no costly cigar nor precious merchandise ever passes his lips — he is a ~~half~~ <sup>half</sup> strict believer in simplicity of life as the handmaiden of hard work. The news nowadays even looks at the morning papers, so *Wilde*





he cut himself off from the <sup>Society</sup> ~~fraternal interests of the day~~, though he still goes on taking in the Athenaeum, in the hope that it may even now do the same to him. So without dawdling over the perusal of news, he immediately ~~assumes~~ <sup>resumes</sup> work and does not desert until the stroke of twelve, when punctually he folds up his papers, wipes his pen, puts away his books of reference and starts for his afternoon's walk up and down the King's Road, Chelsea. With his tall, broad figure, carefully brushed with hat and frock-coat which though old-fashioned ~~was~~ <sup>is</sup> evidently cut by a <sup>good</sup> fashionable tailor, old Mr Wilde is well-known to all frequenters of the thoroughfare. The tradespeople, too, know him well and often waylay him as he ~~passes~~ attempts to pass on.

After the early dinner, the time is passed pleasantly in reading Russian to his <sup>two</sup> ~~youngsters~~ <sup>youngsters</sup>; after that more ~~leisurely~~ literary work, a light supper, a glass of grog and bedtime. But not always rest! Often, his good lady tells me, has she woken at three or four in the morning to find her husband still sitting up in bed or pacing up and down the bedroom in participation of that same joke of which he sketched for her the outline as they were sitting to rest: yes, and it is in this inevitable perseverance, this infinite capacity for taking pains, this "git," as they call it in the North, that lies Mr Wilde's secret. True that the whole body of his signed works is very small - a book of parodies upon Boccaccio, a few fairy-tales in the manner of Hans Andersen, an experimental novel in the style of Poe, a volume of essays, which he later in life obliged blushing to repudiate, ~~and a few plays, which recall a French play~~ written in collaboration with M. Hureys and one or two English ones in collaboration with Mr G. R. Sims. But surely we must judge an artist, not so much by his achievement as by his methods of procedure and through such a story as the ~~Birth of the Infants~~ <sup>the story of Mr W's</sup> (I came across a copy of it lately at an old book-stall in Vigo Street) too occupies only the extreme middle of no more than forty pages, the author has given me his word that it took him six months hard unmitigated labour to complete.

After all, it is not so much as a literary man that Postivity will forget Mr Wilde, as in his <sup>old</sup> capacity of journalist. The visit to America, that is still so fresh in the old gentleman's memory, doubtless influenced his style in so small degree and many an old freemason can testify to the great vivacity and humour of their colleague, though they may envy the indomitable vitality which enables one so far past his meridian to continue "producing." Perhaps the most startling feature of his career was the manner in which, putting his broad shoulders to the wheel, he was able so late in life to strike out into dramatic writing - a branch that he had never till then attempted. When Mr Sydney Cooper contributed to the <sup>last</sup> Academy hit on a picture of a hunt scene, very one was surprised but that Oscar Wilde should have written a four act play and got it produced by a London Manager, fairly beat all records of senile enterprize. We critics, were really touched and - who will blame us for it? - agreed to withhold those criticisms which we should otherwise have been forced to make upon the production. It was a pretty occasion and anyone who was present, as I was at the first night will look back with affection at its memory. The play, itself a chapter of reminiscences - the audience good-natured and respectful - the hearty calls of "Author!" and finally <sup>his</sup> ~~the~~ appearance









impudence relapsed into abashed silence abashed. Since then, the old journalist  
 gentleman has contracted a strange habit of chuckling to himself  
 inordinately at whatever he says and to such a degree has this  
 habit grown upon him that at the last dinner-party he even  
 attended it was decided that he had the rare faculty of  
 keeping a whole table perfectly serious, whilst he himself was  
 convulsed with laughter. I think however it is only one of the  
 mannerisms of age and certainly I found him as amusing  
 as ever he was and ~~was~~ as prone to utter ~~exactly~~ those  
 bulls which are an Irishman's privilege and are known in  
 England by the rather pretentious name of paradox. One  
 instance will suffice. <sup>as I was sitting to go</sup> ~~as I was sitting to go~~ <sup>as I was sitting to go</sup> ~~I observed~~ <sup>after we had chatted together for a while</sup> ~~somebody~~ <sup>somebody</sup> ~~somebody~~  
 entered to say that an old lady had called for the character  
 of her new page-boy and as my host <sup>with his passion for all literary work</sup> seemed anxious to  
 write it, I felt I had better take my leave. Just as I was  
 leaving the room I observed that the weather had become very  
 sultry and I feared we should have a storm. "Ah, yes" was  
 the reply, "I expect we shall see the thunder and hear  
 the lightning!" How delightful a possession of words!  
 I left the old gentleman chuckling inordinately at his  
 little joke.

meo Dearborn





## A PEEP INTO THE PAST

OSCAR WILDE! I wonder to how many of my readers the jingle of this name suggests anything at all? Yet, at one time, it was familiar to many and if we search back among the old volumes of Punch, we shall find many a quip and crank out at its owner's expense. But time is a quick mover and many of us are fated to outlive our reputations and thus, though at one time Mr. Wilde, the old gentleman, of whom we are going to give our readers a brief account, was in his way quite a celebrity; today his star is set, his name obscured in this busy, changeful city.

Once a welcome guest in many of our Bohemian haunts, he lives now a life of quiet retirement in his little house in Tite Street with his wife and his two sons, his prop and mainstay, solacing himself with many a reminiscence of the friends of his youth, whilst he leaves his better-known brother, William, to perpetuate the social name of the family. Always noted for his tenacious memory, it is one of the old gentlemen's keenest pleasures to regale a visitor from the outer world with stories of the late Mr. Frank Niles, Mr. Godwin, the



architect, Mr. Robert Browning or the Earl of Lytton, who was not the only member of the upper ten thousand to honour Mr. Wilde with his personal friendship. "All, all are gone, the old familiar faces" and with the quiet resignation of one who knows that he is the survivor of a bygone day, Mr. Wilde tends more and more to exist in its memory or to solace himself with the old classics of which he was ever so earnest a student, with his Keats and his Shakespeare, his Joseph Miller and the literal translations of the Greek Dramatists. Not that he is a mere *laudator temporis acti*, a bibliophile and nothing more. He still keeps up his writing, is still the glutton for work that he always was. He has not yet abandoned his old intention of dramatising Salome and the amount of journalistic matter that he quietly produces and contributes anonymously to various periodicals is surprising. Only last year an undergraduate journal called the *Spirit Lamp* accepted a poem of his in which there were evidences that he has lost little of his old talent for versification.

Mr. Wilde is an early riser. Every morning, winter and summer at 4:30 A. M. his portly form—(he is in appearance not unlike Sir William Harcourt and still stands six foot three in his slippers)—may be seen bending over the little spirit-kettle, at which he boils himself his cup of





hot cocoa. Donning his work-a-day clothes, he proceeds at once to his study and commences work, continuing steadily to breakfast, which he takes in company with his wife and sons. Himself most regular in his habits, he is something of a martinet about punctuality in his household and perhaps this accounts for the constant succession of page-boys, which so startles the neighbourhood. Breakfast over, the master of the house enjoys his modest cigarette—no costly cigar nor precious meerschaum ever passes his lips—he is a strict believer in simplicity of life as the handmaiden of hard work. He never nowadays even looks at the morning papers, so wholly has he cut himself off from society, though he still goes on taking in the Athenaeum, in the hopes that it may even now do the same to him. So without dawdling over the perusal of news, he immediately resumes work and does not desist until the stroke of twelve, when punctually he folds up his papers, wipes his pen, puts away his books of references and starts for an hour's walk up and down the King's Road, Chelsea. With his tall, bowed figure, carefully brushed silk hat and frockcoat which though old-fashioned was evidently cut by a good tailor, old Mr. Wilde is well-known to all frequenters of the thoroughfare. The trades people, too, know him well and often waylay him as he attempts to pass on.





After early dinner, the time is passed pleasantly in reading Ruskin to his two youngsters; after that more literary work, a light supper, a glass of grog and bed-time. But not always rest! Often, his good lady tells me, has she woken at three or four in the morning to find her husband still sitting up in bed or pacing up and down the bedroom in parturition of that same joke of which he sketched for her the outline as they were retiring to rest. Yes, and it is in this indomitable perserverance, this infinite capacity for taking pains, this "grit," as they call it in the North, that lies Mr. Wilde's secret. True that the whole body of his signed works is very small—a book of parodies upon Rossetti, a few fairy-tales in the manner of Hans Anderson, an experimental novel in the style of Poe, a volume of essays, which Mr. Pater is often obliged blushinggly to repudiate, a French play written in collaboration with Mr. Louÿs and one or two English ones in collaboration with Mr. G. R. Sims. But surely we must judge an artist, not so much by his achievement as by his methods of procedure and though such a story as the *The Theory of Mr. W. S.* (I came across a copy of it lately at an old book-stall in Vigo Street) occupied only the extreme middle of no more than forty pages, the author has given me his word that it took him six months hard unremitting labour to complete.



After all, it is not so much as a literary man that Posterity will forget Mr. Wilde, as in his old capacity of journalist. The visit to America, that is still so fresh in the old gentleman's memory, doubtless influenced his style in no small degree and many an old pressman can testify to the great vivacity and humour of their colleague, though they may envy the indomitable vitality which enables one so far past his meridian to continue "producing." Perhaps the most startling feature of his career was the manner in which, putting his broad shoulder to the wheel, he was able so late in life to strike out into dramatic writing—a branch that he had never till then attempted. When Mr. Sydney Cooper contributed to the last Academy but one a picture of a hunt scene, everyone was surprised, but that Oscar Wilde should have written a four act play and got it produced by a London manager, fairly beat all records of senile enterprises. We critics were really touched and—who will blame us for it?—agreed to withhold those criticisms which we should otherwise have been forced to make upon the production. It was a pretty occasion and anyone who was present, as I was at the first night, will look back with affection at its memory. The play itself a chapter of reminiscences—the audience good natured and respectful—the hearty calls of "Author"





—and finally his appearance before the curtain, bowing with old fashioned grace to the Public, whom he has served so faithfully. Those of us who had known him in the old days, observed that he seemed for the moment dazed and noted with feelings of pity that in his great excitement he had forgotten to extinguish his cigarette, an oversight that the Public was quick to pardon in the old gentleman.

Not long ago, wishing to verify one or two facts for an article I was writing upon the life of the Early Victorian Era and knowing that Mr. Sala was out [of] town, I paid a visit to the little house in Tite Street. I found everything there neat and clean and, though, of course, very simple and unpretentious, bearing witness to womanly care and taste. As I was ushered into the little study, I fancied that I heard the quickly receding *frou-frou* of tweed trousers, but my host I found reclining, hale and hearty, though a little dishevelled upon the sofa. With one hand, readjusting the nut-brown Georgian wig that he is accustomed to wear, he motioned me with a courtesous gesture of the other to an armchair.

The old gentleman was unaffectedly pleased to receive a visit from the outer world, for, though he is in most things "a praiser of past times," yet he is always interested to hear oral news of the



present, and many young poets can testify to the friendly interest in their future taken by a man who is himself contented to figure in their past. As it was, when I had enriched myself from the storehouse of his still unclouded memory, we fell to talking about things in general, and I was struck by the quaint humour which still pervades his talk as well as by the delightfully old-fashioned way in which he rolls out his well-rounded periods. Many a modern conversationalist, I thought, might do worse than take a hint or two from his style. Nor has he lost any of that old Irish readiness for which he was once famed. It is said that a dinner given once at which many were present, Mr. Whistler, then quite a young boy, perpetrated some daring epigram and Wilde, beaming kindly across the table, said, to encourage him, "How I wish I had said that!" Young impudence cried, "You will, Sir, you will." "No. I won't," returned the elder man, quick as thought and young impudence relapsed into silence abashed. Since then, the old journalist has contracted a strange habit of chuckling to himself inordinately at whatever he says and to such a degree has this habit grown upon him that at the last dinner-party he ever attended it was decided that he had the rare faculty of keeping a whole table perfectly serious, whilst he himself was con-





vulsed with laughter. I think, however, it is only one of the mannerisms of age and certainly I found him as amusing as ever he was and as prone to utter those bulls which are an Irishman's privilege and are known in England by the rather pretentious name of paradox. One instance will suffice. After we had chatted together for a while somebody entered to say that an old lady had called for the character of her new page-boy and as my host with his passion for literary work seemed anxious to write it, I felt I had better take my leave. Just as I was leaving the room I observed that the weather had become very sultry and I feared we should have a storm. "Ah, yes," was the reply, "I expect we shall soon *see* the thunder and *hear* the lightning!" How delightful a perversion of words! I left the old gentleman chuckling immoderately at his little joke.

MAX BEERBOHM.













